

Locating Heaney's Poetry: Influences and Interests

## Locating Heaney's Poetry: Influences and Interests

– full text of paper read at the 27<sup>th</sup> International  
Conference of IASIL Japan, 2010

Martin Connolly

If I were to melt down the various strands of my somewhat ambitious abstract (considering we have only twenty minutes) into one main concern, it would be in regard to what I call 'the discernible change in Heaney's lyric enterprise after his very earliest volumes.' In other words, how, and why, did Heaney's poetry appear to change, and often quite radically, after, say, *Door into the Dark*? Or why, as some might put it, did his poetry become more difficult? *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* (1996 edition, I might add) makes it all very simple: *Death of a Naturalist* is 'rooted in childhood experiences of life in rural Co. Derry,' with the poet reflecting upon 'death, the recapture of a lost time, and the freedom and joy of artistic creativity.'<sup>(1)</sup> Nothing necessarily obscure there. The second collection, *Door into the Dark*, however, goes 'beyond the familiar to the unknown,' with the poet investing portraits of local people 'with a mythic quality, turning them into gods of place and poetry.' The third book, *Wintering Out*, travels further again, replacing the 'mythologized craftsmen and labourers' with the 'ghostly revenants of forgotten and neglected people.' Here, then, Heaney is seen as investigating, or excavating, the past, 'developing a view of language, history, and myth as intimately bound up with

territory and landscape.’ The rest, as they say, is history. Next stop, *North*, and those finely wrought poems on ancient Scandinavian bog-preserved bodies as emblematic counterparts of victims of late twentieth century Northern Ireland violence. History, myth and a sense of political awareness are gradually imported into the poetics of the initially apparently rather uncomplicated poetic enterprise. At the same time, the literary references accumulate with greater frequency and density, principally with Dante, Greek mythology, Robert Lowell, W B Yeats, Osip Mandelstam and others stepping into the footsteps of Heaney’s earliest influences: Gerald Manley Hopkins, Ted Hughes, Robert Frost, Dylan Thomas, Patrick Kavanagh, T S Eliot, Robert Graves and William Wordsworth *et al.* <sup>(2)</sup>

Although this is an obvious thing to state, it is Heaney’s proclivities, those aspects of the world around which appear to him most interesting, that direct his poetic enterprise. And among these, we can certainly include the following: the rural world, because that is where he grew up; history, because that was inevitable just by being Irish, and especially Irish Catholic growing up in Northern Ireland in the middle of the twentieth century; myth, because of its exotic yet somehow familiar allure, and its malleability; language, because for a person who chose not to take it for granted it held such enormous potential for unlocking experience; and literature, because it was the life-blood of language, as well as being an immediate bridge to other places, times and modes of seeing and existence. In exploring these areas, Heaney has been more successful than any other poet in terms of popular appeal. One effect of that popularity, then, has been to make many of *his* concerns the concerns and interests of those around him, be they fellow poets (many of whom also embrace stanzaic regularity, dense literary allusiveness

and studiously complex forms of poetic expression), critics (who can certainly find plenty of elements to discuss and debate within Heaney's poems) general readers, or those who just regard him as an Irish national institution. <sup>(3)</sup> This is all fine and well, but his pervasive influence and perceived centrality within modern poetry can lead to a kind of 'Heaneyfication' of what poetry should be, and can also result in a situation where praise often occludes analysis, and blurb-speak becomes the general discourse. <sup>(4)</sup>

By digging ever deeper into those particular avenues of inquiry which have always been of most interest, Heaney, I will argue, focusing on his early work, neglects other areas in his representation of the world around him, perhaps inevitably so. Specifically, in regard to his representation of the rural world he was brought up in, his portrayal of the various characters he describes is decidedly two-dimensional and, on occasion, even lacking in empathy. From the very earliest volumes on, I believe, Heaney aestheticizes the life out of the very people he apparently seeks to capture or memorialize. Awareness of this element in his very earliest poems, then, lessens the impression that his fourth book, *North*, the first section of which comprises of a series of finely wrought, but heavily stylized, pieces dedicated to forging their own mythology, was a radically new departure. *North*, if we study the first three books, was almost inevitable. Added to this, while the adoption of a variety of new literatures into his work after *Wintering Out* leads to a new richness, it also leads to complications of interpretation, and, sometimes, of even simple comprehension. How many readers, for example, could understand his use of a rather esoteric Greek source for 'The Stone Verdict', from *The Haw Lantern*, without doing a considerable amount of homework? <sup>(5)</sup>

In the first three volumes, my attention was drawn specifically to rural characters' conspicuous lack of communicative articulacy. Consistently, they are either silent, speak in very short sentences, speak in unison –suggesting an ingrained group psychology– make animal noises, or gesture in a non-verbal way. Their lack of communicative articulacy –their lack of skill with words– tends to reduce them to being mere ciphers in a rustic landscape, a process, which, in turn, diametrically enhances the view of the poet and elevates his perspective, making him the only eloquent spokesman available to capture this world. This has profound implications for the way in which he views the world that he comes from, for the nature of his poetry –much of which is self-oriented or, as one critic has characterized it, as ‘an obsessive interrogation of his own poetic practices and theories’– and for the direction it would take after *Door into the Dark*.<sup>(6)</sup>

First of all, we have silence, the silence of Heaney's father: note that in ‘Digging’ (the first poem in *Death of a Naturalist*), when the son hands him a drink of milk, the father offers no verbal greeting before or after: ‘He straightened up / To drink it, then fell to right away...’ This silence is continued in ‘Follower’, although the father is shown communicating with the horses he is driving before him in the field, ‘clicking’ his tongue. This is very likely a fair representation of how the young child saw his father, the silence of the father also lending him an air of authority, and mystery, and it works well in these poems. Yet, silence is also on offer from other rustic characters. ‘The Diviner’ (from *Death of a Naturalist*) and ‘Thatcher’ (from *Door into the Dark*) are both completely silent, and, as we might say about Heaney's father, are defined by their work. They execute their skilled work with aplomb and obvious mastery, but words, it seems, are simply not necessary, and are

therefore not recorded. This, again, can be seen as excellent observation by the young Heaney, depicting the country workman, locked into his task, but, the more we read, it also has the feel of a pattern about it. Old Kelly, the owner of the illegal bull in *Door into the Dark*, does have a few lines: 'Go by. / Get up on that gate.' 'She'll do,' and 'If not, bring her back,' but these hardly tell us very much about Old Kelly as a life-and-blood person. He grunts curtly, 'grunt' being, of course, an animal sound. The blacksmith in 'The Forge' also grunts, but is otherwise as taciturn as Heaney's father. We do get an interior monologue by one of the rustics, the wife of a farmer, but it doesn't tell us very much about the woman's interior life. Indeed, 'The Wife's Tale' (from *Door into the Dark*) has been criticized for its lack of empathy with the woman.<sup>(7)</sup> The spoken communication in 'The Wife's Tale' is purely one-way (the man does all the talking), slightly mocking (he tells her we don't really need your prettified cloth for eating), directive (the man tells his wife to look at what they have harvested, and she does), concerned only with the work, and as such, devoid of human interest and affection. These are aspects which could well be rich strains for any poet to work upon, perhaps to explore the disconnectedness of people's lives, or the predicament of woman as a vulnerable servant-type at the centre of a harsh patriarchal society, and yet, Heaney does not. He allows the woman to pass out of shot as the exhausted, but sated, men lounge in the field.

The final image of the men – 'But they still kept their ease / Spread out, unbuttoned, grateful, under the trees' – feels remarkably like the scene in Bruegel's *The Harvesters*, and was likely influenced by it.<sup>(8)</sup> We know that Heaney likes such scenes, because he attempts to create another in the second of the prefatory sequence in *North*, 'The Seed Cutters,'

with the description of farm workers cutting the roots off the potatoes they're harvesting: 'They seem hundreds of years away. Breughel, / You'll know them if I can get them true'. They are 'taking their time / Lazily halving each root that falls apart / In the palm of the hand...' This, in turn, brings us back to 'At a Potato Digging' (from *Death of a Naturalist*), where the protagonists have just finished a long stretch of digging up potatoes and are now happily exhausted, again like something out of Breugel: 'Dead beat, they flop / Down in the ditch and take their fill, / Thankfully breaking timeless fasts; / Then stretched on the faithless ground, spill / Libations of cold tea, scatter crusts.' This poem has brought the reader back to the days of the Famine, and, as with 'faithless ground', reminds the reader of the harshness of country, or even Irish, life. Yet, as with 'The Wife's Tale' and 'The Seed Cutters', it is the pictorial sense which is the most prominent. While Heaney does uncover the idyllic lie in 'At a Potato Digging', because he rightly reminds us of the terrible history behind it, what his pictorial approach does not allow him to do, even when given the chance in the



*The Harvesters*, by Pieter Bruegel, the Elder (c.1525-1569)  
Reproduced by kind permission of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

form of internal monologue, is to peek into the lives of the individual protagonists, and/or to foreground their emotions. Perhaps he is not interested in their emotions.

This pattern of representation, in which individuality is ignored and figures become defined by their activity, is furthered in 'A Lough Neagh Sequence' (from *Door into the Dark*). The poem opens with the stark statement: 'The lough will claim a victim every year', which we learn later is almost like a kind of mantra followed by the fishermen who work there. They are a hardy folk, Heaney impresses upon the reader, who risk their lives, and, because they 'never learn to swim', perhaps wantonly so. For the first time, however, the poet confronts their 'ideas' head-on, asking why they don't take the precaution of learning to swim:

'We'll be the quicker going down,' they say.  
And when you argue there are no storms here,  
That one hour floating's sure to land them safely—  
'The lough will claim a victim every year.'

The exchange highlights, or is designed to highlight, two worlds: that of the fishermen, with their harsh understanding of life, as a cycle they are locked into for better or worse, reduced to choral automaton-like utterances, and the poet, as a person of reason, pointing out what is clear to him, that a human being can alter his or her destiny if only they will apply reason and intelligence.

Of course, Heaney admires the fishermen, too. And, he admires the thatcher, the diviner, the blacksmith and the ploughman, his father, too. Yet, as the tone of exasperation in the first section of 'A Lough

Neagh Sequence' suggests, and as the ending of 'Follower' suggests also, wherein the authorial father-figure now stumblingly follows the son, these specialized activities which these various rustic figures are somehow destined or doomed to re-enact, generation after generation, fail in some fundamental way. In 'Digging' and 'Ancestral Photograph' (from the first book), we get a keen sense of both Heaney's respect for the cyclical nature of these country practices –indeed, with their mastery of skills, each are prototypes for Heaney, the would-be artist– but also, as with the decision to replace the spade with the pen, there is an implicit criticism of these as, for him at least, deficient and unfulfilling.

In *Wintering Out*, Heaney conspicuously attempts to empathize with rural people more than he does in the first two books, in the sense that he writes more poems either spoken in the voices of rustic characters or concerning their individual situations, as in 'Servant Boy', 'The Last Mummer', 'A Winter's Tale', 'Shore Woman' and 'Maighdean Mara', but rather than providing a sense of their individuality, what Heaney does is to employ them to tell the story of Ireland, in terms of its historical or social problems. History, something which played only a small, but significant part in *Death of a Naturalist*, and a slightly greater role in *Door into the Dark*, has now become a major element in Heaney's consciousness. And, with historical concerns comes a greater awareness of the notion of Irish dispossession and the loss of the native language. Heaney is moving away from the relatively simple observation of everyday life and into the observation of the way that history, much of it involving the pain and suffering caused by centuries of English oppression, has affected modern Ireland. He is moving into the articulation of ideas, ideas which can express conflicted notions of Irish identity and the scars of history. These are profoundly important



aspects to his poetry, enriching the tradition of modern Irish poetry in their own way, but they also suggest that Heaney the poet, or Heaney the person, is simply more comfortable with, or adept at, the articulation of ideas as opposed to the depiction of individuals' interior life.

'Bye-Child' is the closest Heaney comes to truly, and movingly, empathizing with a rural character. Interestingly, however, the subject of the poem is an individual who has been robbed of identity and articulacy –the child who was brought up in a chicken-coop. Ironically and poignantly, and perhaps tellingly, considering how Heaney has portrayed many rustic characters up till now, this one rural character out of so many has become eloquent in the very midst of his actual silence:

After those footsteps, silence;  
Vigils, solitudes, fasts,  
Unchristened tears,  
A puzzled love of the light.  
But now you speak at last

With a remote mime  
Of something beyond patience,  
Your gaping wordless proof  
Of lunar distances  
Travelled beyond love.

In a sense, then, 'Bye-Child' is unique among Heaney's early poems, as it offers a convincing glimpse into a mind, and a universe, which is not that of the poet.

If the observational pattern laid out above is correct (and I would be happy to be proved wrong) –that the people who appear in these early Heaney poems are employed as somewhat flimsy vehicles in order to deliver the poet’s largely intellectual concerns–, then it is relatively unsurprising that Heaney might produce a work like *North*, in which the individuals he portrays achieve the ultimate stylization: Iron Age bodies preserved in Scandinavian bogland become the new malleable, mythic people of Heaney’s universe, exquisitely sculpted into the reductive forms that make the complex mess of Northern Ireland reality into something poetically utterable. It may also help to explain a number of other concerns which time precludes me from entering into in any depth: his un-empathetic, two-dimensional and problematic portrayal of Protestants in ‘Docker’ (from *Death of a Naturalist*) and ‘The Other Side’ (from *Wintering Out*); <sup>(9)</sup> the over-formalism of his early love poems, and the relative messiness of his later poems touching upon the very difficult-to-manipulate complexities of married life; <sup>(10)</sup> the potential condescension in ‘Casualty’ (from *Field Work*) in which Heaney suggests that the uneducated Louis O’Neill, and by extension other ‘uneducated’ people, will find his work ‘incomprehensible’; <sup>(11)</sup> the counterpointed effusiveness, even over-effusiveness, of praise for his intellectual peers, Robert Lowell among them; <sup>(12)</sup> and the controversial employment of dead friends and relatives as virtual puppets in his poetic strategies –see especially *Field Work* (‘The Strand at Lough Beg’) and *Station Island* (‘Section VIII’). <sup>(13)</sup>

Heaney’s contribution to Irish letters is enormous and enormously enriching in many ways. His approach is also valid in many ways. He could not have produced a poem of such iconic power as ‘Requiem for the Croppies’ (from *Door into the Dark*) if he had adopted to focus upon

the potential Dostoyevskian messiness of individuality –Paddy Murphy at the end of the row of scythe-shaking Irishmen, shaking in his boots at the prospect of getting a cannon ball through the head. So, in a sense, my criticisms of Heaney's poetry can be seen as unfair because they argue, perhaps unreasonably, for a different poetic. Heaney never set out to write *The Great Hunger: Part Two*, or to create an Irish version of R S Thomas' Iago Prythech. Heaney's approach is not negotiable, and yet it is also not immune from probing inquiry, which, perhaps because it is so relatively rare, is all the more necessary.

.....

### *Post-script*

This paper was read out as part of the second symposium of the conference, entitled 'Contemporary Irish Poetry: Influences and Influence', on Sunday, 10<sup>th</sup> of October, 2010, at Tokyo University, Komaba Campus. The symposium was chaired by Prof Andrew Fitzsimons (who invited me to participate). Prior to my contribution, Prof Nobuaki Tochigi and Prof Mitsuko Ohno spoke, respectively, on the poetry of Dennis O'Driscoll and Julie O'Callaghan, both of whom were in attendance. The original title of my paper was 'Locating Heaney's Poetry: Influences, Pressures and Relationships', which was altered to 'Locating Heaney's Poetry: Influences and Interests' due to a change in the focus of my research.

I have been reading the poetry of Seamus Heaney for most of my life, due in part, no doubt, to the fact that I come from the same part of the world as the poet (Northern Ireland), growing up there in the seventies

and eighties. Heaney was always a major inspiration to me, in the sense that his work gave particular immediacy to the idea of literature and made it so exciting and fresh. His early book of prose, *Preoccupations*, read like a proclamation of the importance of poetry and art, and his poems always possessed the ability to enter consciousness and remain there, perhaps because each seemed so exquisitely created, full of sounds and colours that arrested the reader. So, overall, my acquaintance with Heaney is intensely positive. My interest in Heaney's work might also be described as intensely personal in a sense because of my own poetic writings. Until being asked to write on his work, then, I had no particular academic interest in Heaney, beyond teaching a few of his poems to students in my literature class. Consequently, the preparation for the symposium was quite a learning experience, with plenty of ups and downs.

The resultant paper is more of a work-in-progress than anything else, with, as a colleague pointed out, a great deal more needed to be done prior to submission to a specialised journal. For example, the paper could certainly be improved with reference to Heaney's later work, which I largely pass over. I had also hoped to provide more in the way of detail of literary influences on his work, which, considering the theme of the conference, was among my first considerations. My focus, however, shifted as I investigated further into the nature of Heaney's poetry; and time considerations prevented me from straying far beyond the early poems. I did not realize how emotionally difficult this enterprise was going to be. I struggled with many decisions and perhaps still struggle; I am accustomed to writing about writers in the distant or quite distant past. Temporal distance nurtures critical distance, and provides us with a necessary breathing space. It is astounding how

many critical works have now been written on the work of Seamus Heaney, and also a little disconcerting. I'm sure Seamus Heaney himself must feel the double-edged nature of so much attention. What I eventually got onto the page was a little more contentious in overall thrust than what I had hoped for, yet I also realized fairly early on that playing devil's advocate is also a useful critical activity, and it is in that spirit that I wish to present this record of my presentation at the 27<sup>th</sup> IASIL Japan conference.

***Critical Works Cited***

Andrews, Elmer, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: essays, articles, reviews* –Columbia Critical Guides (New York, Columbia University Press, 1998).

Cavanagh, Michael, *Professing Poetry: Seamus Heaney's Poetics* (Washington, The Catholic University of America Press, 2009).

Clark, Heather, *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast 1962-72* (Oxford, OUP, 2008).

Corcoran, Neil, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study* (London, Faber & Faber, 1998).

Curtis, Tony (ed.), *The Art of Seamus Heaney* (Dublin, Wolfhound Press, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. 2001).

Fitzpatrick, Maurice, *The Boys of St Columb's* (Dublin, The Liffey Press, 2010).

Hart, Henry, *Seamus Heaney: Poet of Contrary Progressions* (New York, Syracuse University Press, 1992).

Hufstader, Jonathan *Tongue of Water, Teeth of Stones: Northern Irish Poetry and Social Violence* (Kentucky, the University of Kentucky Press, 1999).

Lloyd, David, “‘Pap for the Dispossessed’: Heaney and the Post-Colonial Moment’, in Garrat, Robert F (ed.), *Critical Essays on Seamus Heaney* (New York, G K Hall & Co, 1995), pp. 121-38.

O’Donoghue, Bernard (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney* (Cambridge, Cambridge U P, 2009).

O’Driscoll, Dennis, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London, Faber & Faber, 2008).

Schirmer, Gregory A, *Out of What Began: A History of Irish Poetry in English* (Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1998).

Welch, Robert (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996), pp.240-1.

### ***Works of Seamus Heaney cited***

(all published by Faber & Faber; with original date of publication)

*Death of a Naturalist* (1966)

*Door into the Dark* (1969)

*Wintering Out* (1972)

*North* (1975)

*Field Work* (1979)

*Preoccupations* (1980)

*The Haw Lantern* (1987)

*Seeing Things* (1991)

### Notes

- (1) Welch (1996), pp.240-1.
- (2) A number of the essays in Heaney's *Preoccupations* provide plenty of information on the early influences. His Nobel lecture, 'Crediting Poetry' also provides a wealth of references to writers he has admired in his career: <http://nobelprize.org/> (Keyword search: crediting poetry)  
Accessed October 4, 2010.
- (3) Among Heaney's contemporary fellow poets from the North of Ireland who may conform to this description can be counted Paul Muldoon, Ciaran Carson, Derek Mahon and Michael Longley.
- (4) Lloyd (1995), pp.135-6, pointedly cites two blurb-like comments by reviewers: '[Heaney] is the most trusted poet of our islands' and 'Everyone knows by now that Heaney is a major poet'.
- (5) Corcoran (1998), p.137: "'The Stone Verdict'...is...dependent on some relatively esoteric information about Hermes.'
- (6) Schirmer (1998), p. 354.
- (7) Corcoran (1998), pp.14-6: 'When Heaney speaks as a woman in these poems of *Door into the Dark* [also 'Undine'], it still seems very much his own voice doing the talking.' Corcoran also writes of 'the poem's failure of empathy'. 'For all that the men are "grateful" in the poem's Breughel-like closing line, there is something too authoritatively directing in the husband, and too humbly subservient in her, for the monologue to ring true as her account of the relationship.'
- (8) As Corcoran mentions in the immediately previous citation.
- (9) Heaney's 'Docker' is mocked, it may be argued, because the pint of Guinness he has in front of him is adorned, specifically, with a 'Roman' collar, while he sits 'strong and blunt as a Celtic cross,' associations which this Protestant would likely take offense at. And Heaney's Protestant neighbor in 'The Other Side', it may argued, is reduced to caricature: His brain was a whitewashed kitchen / hung with texts [the Bible among them], swept tidy / as the body o' the kirk. Andrews (1998), pp.80-1: 'Others were disturbed by what they took to be Heaney's alignment with "Catholic", "Nationalist" and "Republican" attitudes and his lack of interest in exploring the minds and lives of his Ulster Protestant

neighbours. Are not the few portraits that Heaney gives us in poems such as “Docker” and “The Other Side” examples of a dangerous Catholic stereotyping?” See also Hart (1992), p.70, touches upon the possible offence Heaney’s portrayal of Protestants might occasion.

- (10) Early poems which may be described as overly formal are: (from *Death of a Naturalist*) ‘Twice-Shy’, ‘Poem’, ‘Scaffolding’; or poetically messy or problematic representations of married life: (from *Wintering Out*) ‘Summer Home’ (with its nightmarish suggestion of physical and emotional corruption); (from *Field Work*) ‘The Guttural Muse’, ‘High Summer’ (which, remarkably, employs very similar imagery to ‘Summer Home’, with reference to decaying insects in the context of a description of family life), ‘The Skunk’ (with its strangely eroticized, not to mention potentially sexist and reductive, equivalence of wife and skunk), ‘A Dream of Jealousy’, ‘Polder’, ‘Field Work’ (which, again, may be read as potentially offensive to his wife: ‘you are stained, stained to perfection’); (from *Seeing Things*) part three from ‘Glanmore Revisited’, ‘Scene Shifts’. Heaney’s comments in *Stepping Stones* (O’Driscoll, 2008) on ‘Wedding Day’, from *Wintering Out*, are also intriguing, even perplexing. In the interview, he describes the day itself as a time of celebration, but the poem presents it as an occasion of some distress. Heaney’s family poems constitute by themselves a kind of adjunct to the poetry he is best known for: the poet’s focus and control seem very different from that on dead or inanimate objects. This complex and delicate area of his poetry would clearly require a full study by itself.
- (11) This, of course, is a debatable point, but Heaney’s strategy of veering the conversation, started by O’Neill, away from poetry and onto topics which he assumes his uneducated friend would be more at home with (eels, horses and carts and the IRA) is potentially troubling. One can hardly imagine the likes of poets Pablo Neruda, William Carlos Williams and Roger McGough responding in this way, on the understanding that poetry is available, and is potentially comprehensible, to all people. Neil Corcoran, in his essay ‘Heaney and Yeats’ (O’Donoghue, *Cambridge Companion*, 2009), pp. 165-177, comments, p.172: ‘Arguably, however, this refusal [to discuss poetry] is in fact the greater condescension, the committing by silence or elision of precisely the offence which the poet



claims to wish to avoid; and a readerly unease at this point matches the deep social unease which attends the encounter.' Furthermore, somewhat ironically, Heaney's earliest poems, like 'Digging', need not present any great difficulty for 'uneducated' readers.

- (12) Cavanagh (2009), explains quite a lot about Heaney's admiration for Lowell, which, he suggests, was sometimes overly effusive: p.111: 'Sometimes Heaney's effusions about Lowell are a little vulgar, as when he refers to him as a "silvered Brahmin from Boston."'
- (13) As with the above mentioned poem 'Casualty', the country people in his poems appear to find a voice only in death. Louis O'Neill becomes eloquent in death, posing the poet a very challenging question. In *Station Island*, a number of revenants similarly find their voice, presenting the poet-pilgrim with a variety of equally challenging utterances. It is a complex and delicate area in which to tread, and no doubt requires a separate study by itself, but a number of questions are raised by Heaney's appropriation of the dead in *Station Island*. The employment of Colum McCartney in particular, Heaney's second cousin, who was apparently the victim of a sectarian shooting, as a central figure in not one, but two of Heaney's most famous and esteemed poems, is potentially problematic, or troubling. In Section VIII of *Station Island*, Heaney has McCartney enter Heaney's pilgrimage in order to berate him for over-aestheticizing his death in 'The Strand at Lough Beg' (from *Field Work*). This poetic sequence presents McCartney as very vocal and condemnatory, and yet it is, of course, pure invention. Among critics, the sequence is invariably regarded as an example of Heaney exhibiting feelings of guilt and conscience, for example, Hufstader (1999), p. 62: 'Heaney, that most Catholic of writers in his attention to conscience, is more than willing to admit his moral guilt as an imperfect human being, yet unwilling to compromise his vocation as an artist.' So, it comes as something of a surprise in *Stepping Stones* (O'Driscoll, 2008), pp. 220-1, to read the following: O'Driscoll: [discussing Section VIII '... you allowed your cousin to allege that, in "The Strand at Lough Beg," you "confused evasion and artistic tact." Did you really feel you had been guilty of over-aestheticizing his death, or was this a dramatic dialogue set up to explore the whole idea of public poetry? SH: It was set up, exactly as

you say. It was another of those instances where the intertwining of the “creative” and the “responsible” is, as they say, interrogated. I had not at that stage heard Joseph Brodsky’s dictum that “if art teaches us anything, it is that the human condition is private”, but that’s what’s being said in “The Strand at Lough Beg”. In the opening stanza, there’s probably enough hard information about the context of the killing to offset the healing landscape passage at the end.’ As I have said, this whole subject requires a separate study unto itself, and it is of course problematic also to judge poetry by the post-script comments of poet who created them, but I would think that, post-*Stepping Stones*, critics might wish to be a little more circumspect in describing Section VIII of *Station Island* as a clear indicator of Heaney’s sense of moral guilt. Heaney’s comments appear to suggest emotional detachment and a clear-headed deliberateness in staging the imaginary confrontation. It may very well be, of course, a matter of the poet in fact exhibiting modesty in the O’Driscoll interview and/or a disinclination toward showing his emotional hand in what is already very personal poetry. Further discussion of this may be found online at: <http://foliofound.wordpress.com/2010/04/22/heaney-in-bloomington-pt-2/>, accessed November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2010.